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India's Explosive Language Problem

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INDIA'S EXPLOSIVE LANGUAGE PROBLEM

Multilingual India is emerging from yet another round of violent controversy over the choice of languages to be used in conducting the central government's business. The issue is an old one, but the ebb of Congress Party power in many areas has added new and dangerous dimensions to it. The stakes are high for the future unity of the country, but there is no immediate solution that will not further divide India.

Geographically, the current issue is contributing to a major cleavage between the north and the south. The Hindi-speakers of the north are powerful enough to maintain strong demands for Hindi alone, but despite their agitation are unable to make their will prevail. The south has reacted strongly, drawing on centuries-old fears of northern domination, regional chauvinism, and strong vested interests in the perpetuation of English. Economic factors are at the root of much of the agitation in both north and south, and the non-Congress politicians have been especially quick to capitalize on these. Moreover, many of these politicians have used jingoism aroused by the language issue to an alarming degree in their efforts to build local support.

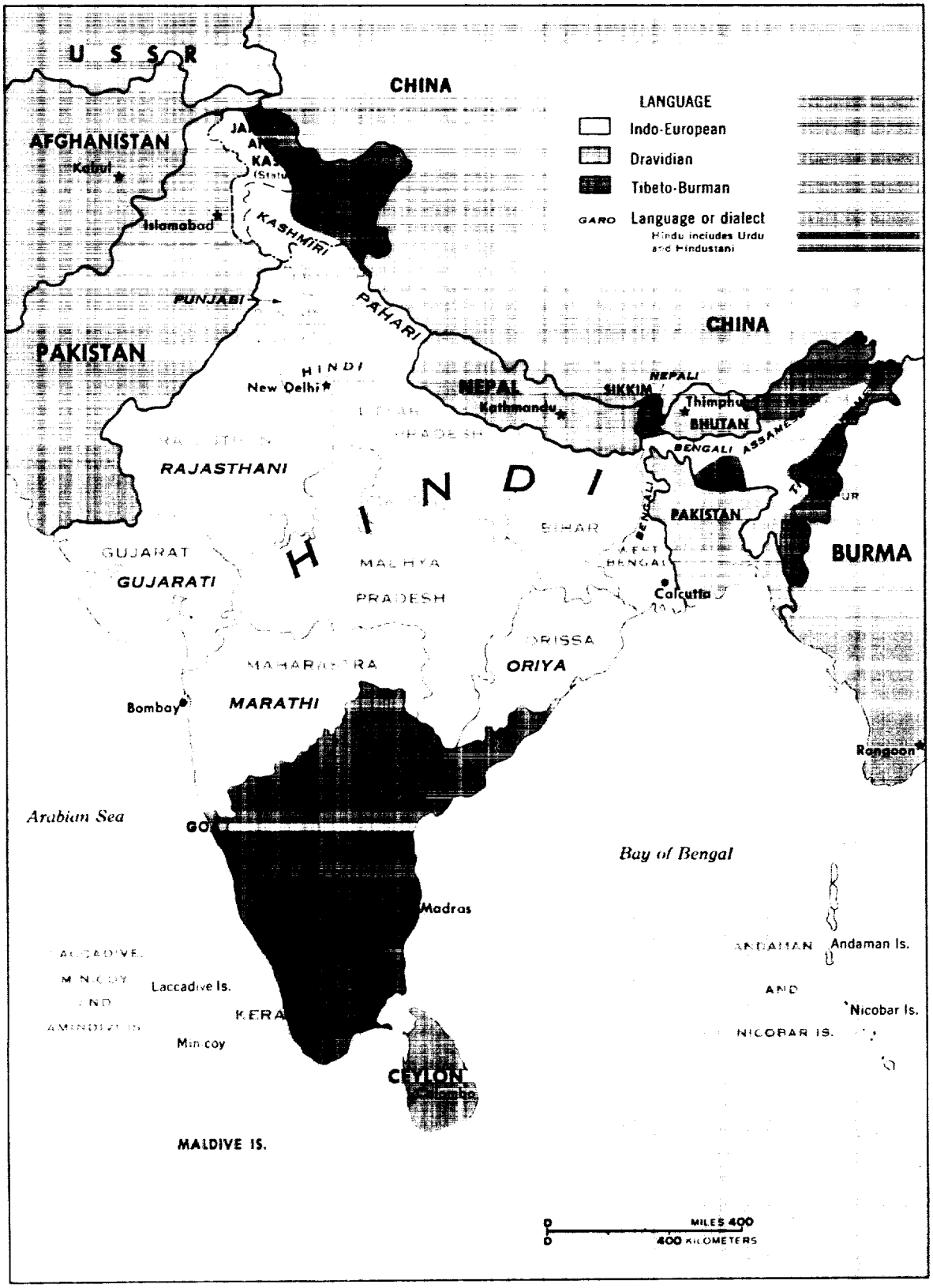
Background

India's language problem is probably the most complex in the world. Waves of peoples and cultures have swept over the subcontinent during its long history, leaving a legacy of ethnic and linguistic diversity. This diversity today is both a strong barrier to the development of national consciousness and a source of chronic friction within some of the 17 states, between states, and between the states and the central government in New Delhi.

The problem is intensified by the tendency of major language groups to regard themselves as cultural entities. Large sections of the population identify themselves strongly with their particular language and take fierce and partisan pride in it. The language problem has taken varying forms and periodically precipitates large-scale unrest.

Whenever language has become a burning public issue, agitation and violence have followed. During the mid-1950s, linguistic

Languages of India



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pride and regional separatism frequently combined to provoke tension, sporadic rioting and occasionally complete breakdowns of law and order. Despite the reluctance of the central government in New Delhi, this agitation led finally to the reorganization of the states largely along linguistic lines.

Geographically, the sharpest linguistic division is between the north and the south. The vast majority of the peoples of northern and central India speak languages belonging to the Indo-European family, while the prominent languages of the south belong to the totally different Dravidian group. (See map) Within these broad categories, however, are a dozen or more mutually unintelligible languages, each with its own distinctive script. Hundreds of dialectal variants, as well as a number of minor, unrelated languages, further complicate the problem of communication. The most widely spoken language is Hindi, a north Indian tongue which has nearly four times as many native speakers as the second-ranking language, Telugu. Even so, Hindi speakers constitute only a third of the population, although several other north Indian tongues are related to Hindi.

Linguistic issues have long bedeviled Indian politics. In recent years the language problem has centered primarily on the extent to which English should supplement Hindi as a working language of the central government and, indeed, whether Hindi should remain India's sole official language. This "official language question" has often led to widespread unrest as competing groups have attempted to advance the interests of their own native tongues.

Origins of the Official Language Problem

During the long colonial period English became the link language for communication between people living in different areas of the country, although use of it was largely limited to the Western-influenced upper levels of the population. From the mid-19th century onward English was the working language of a growing corps of Indian civil servants. It became the language of government, commerce, and the universities. English contributed to the growing sense of solidarity among the political and intellectual elites who spearheaded the independence movement.

Now spoken by about three percent of the population, English remains the most important language for government and business activities conducted on a country-wide scale. It is subject, however, to almost constant attack by striving non-English speakers, especially from the backward Hindi-speaking areas of north India.

The language question was one of the most bitterly controversial issues dealt with by the drafters of the Indian constitution. To most of the constituent assembly it seemed incompatible with the country's newly won sovereignty to uphold the paramount status of English--the foreign tongue of the former colonial regime. Yet, despite strong pressures from the

Hindi north, no native language was deemed sufficiently developed to replace English as the official working language of the British-trained bureaucracy. Moreover, any native language would have been "foreign" to most of the population.

Unable to solve this basic problem, the framers of the 1950 constitution temporized with a compromise provision that merely took some of the immediate heat out of the issue. "Hindi in the Devanagri script" became the "official language of the Union," but English would continue to be used for 15 years (until January 1965) for "all the official purposes" in which it was employed prior to the constitution. Parliament, however, was empowered to prolong the use of English beyond 1965, if necessary.

This compromise solution dissatisfied many among both the Hindi and the non-Hindi speaking peoples. Language, particularly as it affects the recruitment, promotions, and functioning of the central government's civil services, has been a touchstone of Indian politics ever since. A basic north-south clash of interests has arisen from the fact that during British rule non-Hindi speaking south Indians acquired a dominant position within the central bureaucracy. Many northerners who champion the cause of Hindi do so in an attempt to offset this imbalance and to give Hindi speakers a distinct advantage.

This north-south regional rivalry is exacerbated by the fact that Hindi-speaking India is an area of low literacy, low urbanization, and low industrialization. Thus, implicit in the struggle over the official language is the fear of the more developed states like Madras that if Hindi-speakers should gain a preponderant share of the government posts, the Hindi-speaking states will win an irrevocable advantage in the distribution of the central government's scarce resources.

Almost immediately after the adoption of the constitution, as plans progressed for the difficult shift from English to Hindi, anguished protests came from the non-Hindi speaking peoples. Centuries-old fears of northern domination and regional chauvinism combined to bring strong pressures on New Delhi.

Prime Minister Nehru in 1959 indefinitely extended the deadline for the change-over, and subsequently New Delhi made various pronouncements calculated to reassure the non-Hindi speakers that they would not suffer discrimination. As a final move to head off the impending storm, Parliament in 1963 passed the Official Language Act, specifying that English "may" continue to be used for virtually all official central government purposes for an indefinite time after the expiration of the 15-year grace period.

Despite these efforts, violent protests broke out in south India with the constitutional coming of age of Hindi in 1965. The south Indians--especially the proud and volatile Tamils of Madras--combined a traditional distrust of northerners with a belief that the Official

Language Act would not long protect their special position in the central civil services. They branded Hindi an instrument of north Indian "imperialism" and called for a constitutional amendment ensuring the continued use of English as the all-India link language.

Mob violence ravaged much of Madras and broke out in other non-Hindi areas. The disturbances were calmed only when Prime Minister Shastri and his colleagues in the Congress Party high command publicly committed themselves to strengthening the 1963 legislation.

The 1967 Language Legislation

Late last year, when Shastri's successor, Indira Gandhi, attempted to make good his pledge, the uproar by both pro- and anti-Hindi elements forced her to make concessions which satisfied neither camp. A highly controversial amendment to the 1963 Official Language Act and an accompanying policy resolution were rammed through Parliament last December amid anguished cries from the opposition and mounting popular agitation across northern India. What was originally intended as a giant step toward a final compromise solution fell far short of that objective and left unresolved many of the same problems that have provoked language disorders in the past.

The original 1967 draft amendment bill committed the central government to using both Hindi and English "until the legislatures of the non-Hindi speaking states decided otherwise." Within the central government the bill required translations of all documents into English until non-Hindi speaking civil servants "have acquired a working knowledge of Hindi."

Parliament added several pro-English amendments during the bill's consideration which underscored this commitment to bilingualism. English, for example, became obligatory in correspondence between New Delhi and the non-Hindi states, and English translations are required of communications from a Hindi state to a non-Hindi state.

These provisions were generally accepted by non-Hindi-speaking Indians, who had largely abandoned their earlier demand that the constitution itself be amended. The northern pro-Hindi forces, however, led by the Hindu nationalist Jan Sangh party and the increasingly militant Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), reacted vehemently. Offering parliamentary resistance at every stage and inciting violent public protest demonstrations in major north Indian cities, the Hindi advocates attempted to undermine the thrust of the amendment bill. In some places mobs painted out English signs and vandalized establishments bearing English names. In Uttar Pradesh, the demonstrators were abetted by the reluctance of the state government, an unstable coalition which depended heavily on Jan Sangh and SSP support, to put down the disorders.

The Hindi supporters, including a significant number of Congress Party legislators, finally forced the modification of a government

language policy resolution which had been tabled in Parliament along with the language bill. The changes include a provision that knowledge of either English or Hindi should be compulsory for recruitment into the civil services, except for posts requiring "a high standard of English alone or Hindi alone." This introduces for the first time the principle that a job applicant knowing only Hindi might be appointed to a competitive position in the all-India services.

Non-Hindi speakers view this policy as highly discriminatory, since the minority of Hindi speakers will be taking competitive examinations in their native tongues, while everyone else will be using a foreign language. To help equalize this burden, the policy resolution also recommends that schools teach three languages--the regional tongue, English, and Hindi or, in Hindi areas, another Indian language. This has not satisfied the southerners, who are skeptical that the three-language formula will ever be applied in the north.

The Southern Reaction

The stormy debate in Parliament, coupled with violent pro-Hindi agitation in the north and the pro-Hindi twist given to the language resolution, has crystalized the latent feeling in the south that non-Hindi groups can expect only incomprehension, condescension, or fanatical intolerance from the Hindi north. The Gandhi government's willingness to give way to Hindi pressures has fostered a feeling that New Delhi's word on the language issue cannot be fully trusted. This legacy of distrust may prove to be a formidable barrier to further language compromises.

In Madras, local reactions have been moderated by the governing party--the Tamil-boosting Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)--which had ousted the Congress Party in 1967 with the help of a powerful student anti-Hindi movement. It quickly came under heavy pressure to take concrete action against the new measures. Bowing to these demands, the DMK-dominated state assembly defiantly passed its own resolution, which throws both the three-language formula and the teaching of Hindi out of the Madras school system and calls for the dethronement of Hindi as India's official language. Largely as a result of these concessions to popular sentiment, the violence, looting, and destruction of central government property which have since occurred in Madras have been less than in 1965.

In Andhra Pradesh and Mysore, however, the Congress Party is still in power and these regimes are committed to enforcement of the central government's language policy. Consequently, anti-Hindi demonstrations of unprecedented scope and violence have broken out in both states. Andhra Pradesh has witnessed repeated processions, train stoppages, forced closures of theaters showing Hindi films and even police firings on rampaging mobs. In Mysore at least six persons were killed during similar agitation.

Much of this unrest is a reaction to well-publicized displays of northern linguistic intolerance. In addition to sensationalized

newspaper coverage, south Indians living in the north have sent back accounts of aggressive introduction of Hindi into the bureaucratic routine in New Delhi, of anti-English and anti-south demonstrations, and of day-to-day exposure to the fanaticism of Hindi zealots.

Students in particular have come to feel that their northern counterparts are winning long-term economic advantages through agitational methods used on pliant politicians. Worsening prospects for employment also add a new sense of urgency. In Andhra Pradesh especially, this comes on top of persistent student restlessness which has intermittently interrupted the educational system for the past two years. In general, the feeling has grown in the south that regional interests are no longer as adequately protected as they once were by a strong Congress Party.

Hindi Fanaticism in the North

The recent success of hard-core Hindi fanatics in drawing more moderate elements into all-out advocacy of Hindi does not augur well for future compromise. In mid-1967, when government proposals to amend the Official Language Act began to take concrete form, more than 200 members of Parliament--both Congress and opposition--petitioned Mrs. Gandhi to abandon the project. Although the strained Congress Party ranks held firm, the strife which accompanied the debate has etched feelings even more deeply.

Underlying the north's responsiveness to pro-Hindi themes is the general backwardness of the heavily populated Hindi heartland. Uttar Pradesh state alone--the center of Hindi fanaticism--has a largely illiterate and economically depressed population of about 85 million people administered by over 500,000 civil servants.

Expectations for a better future are nonetheless on the rise, in the north, especially among younger people. An unprecedented number of students are embarking on higher education with the hope of securing better jobs. Yet, even when the medium of instruction is English, the bulk of the northern graduates do not really acquire a useful knowledge of the language and this severely limits their chances for the employment they seek. Consequently the growing student population provides a reservoir of discontent for those who would exploit the language issue for personal or party reasons.

Caste rivalries add another dimension to the pro-Hindi movement. Poor but rising castes, whose sons attend inadequate schools, resent the ability of the traditionally more prosperous castes to monopolize the few good English-medium institutions. The advantages to these poorer groups in eliminating English seem clear.

The highly unstable political situation within the Hindi heartland has further ripened the area for language agitation. In the four predominantly Hindi states--Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana--seven state governments have collapsed during the last year and two of the four are now under direct rule from New Delhi. In this highly charged

political atmosphere, the politicians have readily seized upon any exploitable issue to advance personal, caste, factional, and party interests.

The non-Congress Party politicians especially have proselyted widely within the educational system and used student pro-Hindi sentiments to gain support in the permanent struggle for power and position. There is little prospect that this political situation will change in the foreseeable future, and language therefore is likely to remain a highly emotionalized issue in the north.

Prospects

India's explosive language problem is becoming increasingly a vehicle for political rivalry. The same kinds of forces that carried the DMK to the top in Madras are now present in two other southern states--Mysore and Andhra Pradesh--and are manifested in the grass-roots politics of much of the Hindi belt. The battle lines have been clearly drawn over two decades of independence and there is little likelihood that the emotional official language issue will soon recede.

There are, however, several short- and long-term factors that may help to take some of the sting out of the issue. Two of the most militantly pro-Hindi parties, the Jan Sangh and the SSP, have recently shown signs of modifying their earlier extreme pro-Hindi position in hopes of broadening support in non-Hindi areas.

There is also some evidence that Hindi extremism has stirred some usually quiescent pro-English forces in the Hindi heartland. Among these are urban commercial and entrepreneurial interests who see Hindi fanaticism as potentially disruptive to their business activities. Many untouchables, tribesmen, and other backward groups--persons at the very bottom of the social scale--value the contribution of English to the gradual progress of depressed classes and may exert a calming influence. Prime Minister Gandhi, despite her responsiveness to pro-Hindi pressure, has stressed the moderate stand taken by her two predecessors and has thus far held her party reasonably well in line when necessary.

There appears to be some correlation between the intensity of language discord and the state of the economy. Hard times intensify the competition for jobs and, perhaps more importantly, for scarce economic development resources. This year's bumper harvest and the general expectation of a short-term economic recovery may result in a temporary mellowing of mood. The chances for continued improvement over the longer run, however, seem as uncertain as the prospects for the economy itself.

The violent phase of the current disorder in the south is receding, but it is leaving behind a deposit of resentment against Hindi that will not easily be removed. A key determinant in the outcome of the anti-Hindi agitation

will be whether the opposition in the Congress-ruled states of Andhra Pradesh and Mysore are inclined or able to emulate the DMK in using language antagonisms to end Congress rule, a possibility which cannot be fully assessed at this point. Meanwhile, some local Congress leaders in Madras seem to be playing a dangerous double game by stirring up anti-Hindi feeling in hopes that the DMK will be unable to mollify or control its erstwhile supporters and will thus stand discredited. The yet unresolved problem of civil service language requirements may at any time spark new violent discord.

The stakes in the language controversy are high. On the one hand, those struggling to build a consciousness of unity and nationhood feel an urgent need to broaden the basis of communication throughout the country. On the other hand, any concrete moves toward that end inevitably antagonize some special interests and stir up the very forces of regional separatism they are intended to subdue. Thus, it seems likely that the politics of language will continue for some time to strain the thin fabric of India's national unity.

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